

FIRST ARMY CORPS

(20,935 MEN / 87 GUNS)

LIEUTENANT GENERAL JAMES LONGSTREET

James Longstreet was the dean of the Southern corps commanders at Gettysburg. The forty-two year old had been in corps command twice as long as anybody else on either side, and it was he who would command the Army of Northern Virginia if Gen. Robert E. Lee became incapacitated. Longstreet was a devoted poker player, and as such was the opposite of a gambler. He was a man who studied the averages and calculated the odds very carefully. Never one to force his chances, he preferred to wait for Fredericksburg-type situations—where he could prepare his defenses on advantageous terrain and then await his enemy's attack. If the odds were not in his favor, he would wait for the moment when he held the high card. Longstreet, also in the nature of a good poker player, approached his business dispassionately. To him, victory was the result of thoughtful planning, not heroism or a careless roll of the dice. While he supported Lee's bold strategic offensives, it was always with an eye to fighting a defensive battle at the climax of each campaign. He felt that conserving the lives of his soldiers was the best way to gain equality with the numerically superior Union army, and he rued the high casualty counts brought on by costly assaults. Longstreet thus dealt in human life with a conservatism lacking in many military men—especially in the South—and showed constant concern for their well-being. At Fredericksburg, for instance, when his engineers protested to him that artillerymen were digging their emplacements too deep, Longstreet refused to stop the spade-wielding gunners: "If we only save the finger of a man, that's good enough," he said.



Longstreet's appearance was like that of his personality: oversized, blunt and rugged. Six feet two inches tall and burly, he gave the impression of solidity and dependability rather than dash or brilliance. His aide, Lt. Col. G. Moxley Sorrel, described him at First Manassas:

A most striking figure. . . a soldier every inch, and very handsome, tall and well proportioned, strong and active, a superb horseman and with an unsurpassed soldierly bearing, his features and expression fairly matched; eyes, glint steel blue, deep and piercing; a full brown beard, head well shaped and poised. The worst feature was the mouth, rather coarse; it was partly hidden, however, by his ample beard.

Completely unfettered by nervous habits, Longstreet's calm presence on the battlefield imparted a feeling of well-being to those around him. Longstreet maintained a magnificent fearlessness. At Sharpsburg, one witness recalled that, under fire, he was "as cool and composed as if on dress parade. I could discover no

trace of unusual excitement except that he seemed to cut through his tobacco at each chew." Longstreet later revealed his philosophy to a colonel on the battlefield of Chickamauga. When an artillery shell shrieked by, the colonel flinched. "I see you salute them," chided Longstreet. "Yes, every time," the colonel answered. "If there is a shell or bullet over there destined for us," Longstreet mused, "it will find us." His imperturbability, which seems to have been his preeminent trait, may have had something to do with the fact that he was slightly deaf. At any rate, few ever saw him get excited about anything, good or bad.

Of Dutch descent, Longstreet was born in 1821 in South Carolina but grew up mostly in Georgia. He was accepted at West Point, but was a poor student who preferred the physical side of military life; he graduated only 54th out of 62 in the Class of 1842. After graduation, he served a tour of duty at Jefferson Barracks outside St. Louis, Missouri, where he fell in love with the regimental commander's daughter, Louise Garland. She was only 17, and her parents insisted the couple wait until she was older to marry. The smitten Longstreet departed to serve in the Mexican War with Louise's daguerreotype in his pocket. He was wounded in the thigh while carrying the flag forward in the storming of Chapultepec, and when the veteran officer returned in 1848, the couple wed. They eventually had ten children together (oddly, Longstreet neglected to mention her in his memoirs). Life settled down into a dreary succession of dusty outposts, and he became content with the safe but dull duties of a post paymaster.

When the Civil War began in 1861 Longstreet joined the Confederate army with the intent of continuing as a paymaster. Instead, he was made a brigadier general, and within a fortnight was commanding a brigade in the First Manassas Campaign. In those two weeks, he imposed discipline, drilled the brigade three times a day, and saw to the care of his men. His brigade saw light action at a

skirmish near Blackburn's Ford, but was not heavily involved at First Manassas. Longstreet's strong presence, though, did gain notice from his peers. Cavalryman Fitzhugh Lee recalled seeing him and thinking, "there is a man that cannot be stampeded." By the fall of 1861, Longstreet and Brig. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson were already marked as the two outstanding brigadiers in the Confederate army. On October 7, both were promoted to major general, and Longstreet was given command of the Third Division of the army.

His aide, Thomas Goree, wrote during this time that Longstreet's "forte as an officer consists in the seeming ease with which he can handle and arrange large numbers of troops, as also with the confidence and enthusiasm with which he seems to inspire them. . . . If he is ever excited, he has a way of concealing it, and always appears as if he had the utmost confidence in his own ability to command and that of his troops to execute." He could be difficult, however, and at times sulked and pouted. Goree noticed that when someone displeased him, "he does not say much, but merely looks grim. We all know now how to take him, and do not talk much to him without we find if he is in a talkative mood. He has a good deal of the roughness of the old soldier about him."

When the war heated up in the spring of 1862 with Maj. Gen. George McClellan's arrival on the Peninsula, Longstreet displayed ability in the early fighting at Williamsburg. At Seven Pines, however, he not only performed miserably but tried to place the blame on a fellow officer. However, in the Seven Days' Battles, where Jackson faltered, Longstreet performed admirably. Following the action on the swampy Peninsula, Lee divided his army into two wings, giving one each to Jackson and Longstreet.

At Second Manassas in late August Longstreet displayed both of his prominent tendencies: his methodical preparations while getting into position to deliver a blow, and his ability to manage large

numbers of men in a sweeping attack which, when finally delivered, swept John Pope's army from the field. A few weeks later, at Sharpsburg, wearing carpet slippers and riding sidesaddle on account of a boot-chafed heel, Longstreet rode up and down the lines, holding his men in place along the center and right of Lee's broken army through the critical hours of the late afternoon. When the fight was over and Longstreet reported back to headquarters, Lee exclaimed, "Here comes my war horse from the field he has done so much to save!" When Lee promoted both men to lieutenant general in the fall and organized the army into two corps, he submitted Longstreet's name ahead of Jackson's, which gave him a slight edge in seniority. He was a "War Horse" to Lee, "Pete" or "Old Pete" to his men, "Dutch" to his West Point cronies, sometimes "Bull" or "Bulldog" to others. Few colorful stories attached themselves to him, however, because of his phlegmatic personality. It was not always so.

During the first year of the war, Longstreet was outgoing and gregarious; indeed, his headquarters had been a center of socialization where visitors could expect a good time, a fine meal, plenty of whiskey—and a convivial game of poker. "He was rather gay in disposition with his chums," wrote Sorrel. Then in January 1862, three of his children died in a single week during a scarlet fever epidemic in Richmond. When the bereaved general returned to the army from the heart-breaking funeral, he was, said Sorrel, "a changed man." The poker parties stopped, he rarely drank thereafter, and he became a devout Episcopalian. While he had always on the taciturn side by nature, after the death of his children he became more withdrawn, often saying little beyond a gruff "yes" or "no."

During operations between Sharpsburg and Fredericksburg, General Lee followed the custom of pitching his tent close to Longstreet's. Although the two often differed fundamentally in their philosophy of how the conflict should be waged, Lee valued Longstreet's opinions and liked "Old

Peter"—even if he was at times presumptuous when he advanced his recommendations to Lee. Perhaps this is the trait that most endeared Lee to Longstreet and Jackson, for in an army where most generals were disposed to await instructions, these two advanced their own ideas in their own forceful ways.

Longstreet considered Fredericksburg to be the most instructive battle of the war. His veterans, well positioned on Marye's Heights and supported by artillery, repulsed wave after wave of Federal attackers. Appreciating the power of the defensive as few generals did, Longstreet sought to repeat this scenario. Perhaps Fredericksburg spoiled him by giving him the notion that if he got in position and stayed there, impatient Union generals would crash headlong into his prepared defenses like Union commander Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside did on that December day.

In February 1863, Longstreet was detached with two of his divisions and sent below Petersburg with a set of contradictory orders that eventually resulted in a large foraging expedition to Suffolk, Virginia. Thus he was not present for the army's spectacular victory at Chancellorsville in May. While some have argued he was deliberately slow in returning—and could have been present for some of the fighting at Chancellorsville—a careful reading of the evidence does not support such a conclusion. The campaign resulted in the death of Jackson and the reorganization of the army from two corps into three, which in turn required a pair of new corps commanders.

After Lee reunited the army and appointed Richard Ewell and A. P. Hill to lead the new Second and Third Corps, respectively, Longstreet discussed the strategy of the upcoming operation with Lee. He came away with the impression that Lee intended to fight a defensive battle.

As the army marched north into Maryland and Pennsylvania, James Longstreet was the rock upon which Lee relied. He was at the height of his military career as

the armies moved toward battle on July 1, 1863.

GETTYSBURG: Longstreet's two lead divisions under Maj. Gens. John Bell Hood and Lafayette McLaws, started July 1 in Greenwood, a town about 17 miles west of Gettysburg located on the western face of South Mountain. Lee ordered Longstreet to move to Gettysburg, but "Old Pete's" men were forced to wait for the slow 14-mile-long wagon train of the Second Corps to pass by on the Chambersburg Pike, the only road over the mountain. Longstreet's men finally got moving from Greenwood around 4:00 p.m. and marched 13 miles by midnight, halting near Marsh Creek, about 3 1/2 miles west of Gettysburg.

Longstreet had ridden ahead on July 1 and had found General Lee about 5:00 p.m. standing on Seminary Ridge observing the Union position on Cemetery Hill. Longstreet took out his field glasses and surveyed the enemy position for a few minutes, then turned to Lee and said he did not like the look of things, and urged a move to the right, which would take the Confederate army past the Union left beyond the Round Tops. There, Longstreet advocated, the army could place itself between the Army of the Potomac and Washington, and the Federals would be forced to attack to restore their communications with the capital. Lee disagreed. The Union army was in front of him, he said, and he would strike it there. If the enemy army is there tomorrow, Longstreet retorted, it is because he wants you to strike him. The discussion was dropped for the time being.

About 3:00 a.m. the next morning, July 2, Longstreet's column resumed its march and advanced a mile or so to near Seminary Ridge, where the men stopped and rested while Longstreet and Hood went to Lee's headquarters; McLaws was the last to arrive. Lee was mulling over plans for the day's battle, and a little after 9:00 a.m., he gave Longstreet orders to march McLaws and Hood's divisions unseen opposite the Union left—which he apparently considered to be somewhere north

and west of Little Round Top—and attack it, rolling it up Cemetery Ridge (George Pickett's Division was still not up). Lee wanted McLaws to attack perpendicular to the Emmitsburg Road so as to envelop the enemy flank. Longstreet corrected Lee, explaining the his division should be formed parallel to the road, but Lee repeated his previous order. Hood would move forward after McLaws.

Longstreet requested and received Lee's approval to await the arrival of Evander Law's Brigade, of Hood's Division, before moving out, and Lee agreed. To Longstreet's way of thinking, it made sense to have all of your men in hand before striking (the delay absorbed some forty minutes and Law arrived about noon). Longstreet finally started McLaws and Hood, in that order, south along the west side of Herr Ridge toward their destination opposite the Union left. Longstreet was under orders to move without being seen by the enemy—Lee had provided a guide for that purpose. The Confederates belatedly discovered that when the route over the southern end of Herr Ridge was visible to Union scouts on Little Round Top. Longstreet halted his men short of this stretch and gave the order to countermarch—they would begin again and try another approach.

After the column had retraced its steps, the two divisions marched three miles along a hidden route to Pitzer's Woods. The frustrating countermarch took hours to complete, but it was in compliance with Lee's directive that it be conducted without being seen. According to Colonel Moxley Sorrel, Longstreet failed to conceal some anger at Lee's orders to attack in spite of his several objections, although evidence that this anger delayed or adversely affected the march of his divisions is open to debate.

What is not open to debate is that the Union left was not where Lee supposed it to be. When McLaws' men reached their destination opposite the Peach Orchard, it was bristling with enemy troops and several batteries. Another delay ensued while Hood's Division was deployed to the right

(south) of McLaws. This improvisation required Hood's soldiers to begin the onslaught, and it was designed as an echelon assault (Hood, then McLaws, then Anderson's Third Corps division).

Longstreet's men were finally in place about 4:00 p.m. Hood sought a further modification of the attack plan by seeking permission to move his division around Big Round Top and attack the enemy in flank and rear. Longstreet refused his request three times. "Already our line was dangerously extended," wrote the astute observer E. Porter Alexander, "and to have pushed one or two divisions past the 3d corps would have invited their destruction." It also would have further delayed the attack and required new orders be issued up and down the line. Whether Longstreet refused Hood out of tactical considerations or bad temper is hard to tell.

Sometime around 4:00 p.m. Alexander's artillery opened on the enemy lines. Hood's Division jumped off about one-half hour later and drove across the Emmitsburg Road and lashed out against the Rose Farm and woods, Stony Hill and Devil's Den sectors of Dan Sickles' advanced Third Corps line. Once Hood's men were well engaged, timing McLaws' jump-off was Longstreet's next task. When Union reinforcements caused Hood's attack to falter, Longstreet sent in McLaws' Division about 5:00 p.m. His attack was well-timed, for the surge of his four fresh brigades smashed the Peach Orchard salient, overran the Federal line along the Wheatfield and Emmitsburg roads, bore down into the Wheatfield, and threatened the collapse of the entire Union left flank.

Enemy reinforcements from the Federal center and elsewhere bolstered the imperiled left flank. Longstreet's attack was designed to be continued on his left with the advance of Maj. Gen. Richard H. Anderson's Division of Hill's Third Corps. As portions of McLaws' Division swept up southern Cemetery Ridge, Anderson launched his brigades east against troops aligned generally along the Emmitsburg

Road and on the ridge itself in an effort to exploit the weakened Union center. The assault, however, lacked the proper coordination and failed to push the Unionists off Cemetery Ridge.

Hood's men fought just below the crest of Little Round Top and in Devil's Den, and the critical area around the Wheatfield changed hands several times. Exhausted and badly bloodied, however, the Confederates began to lose their cohesion and energy. By the onset of darkness, Longstreet's massive July 2 attack on the Union left petered out with the Federal line withdrawn and severely punished—but still intact. Longstreet called the assault "the best three hours of fighting ever done by any troops on any battlefield." His eight brigades had knocked out thirteen Union brigades from the Union Second, Third, and Fifth Corps, but had fallen short of their intended goal.

Longstreet's third division under George Pickett arrived near the field on the afternoon of July 2; it was the only division in the army that had not yet been engaged. After the day's fighting ended, the exhausted Longstreet declined to ride to headquarters to meet with Lee, who therefore sent an order to his "War Horse" calling for the use of Pickett's fresh division in a renewed attack at daylight the next morning in conjunction with Ewell's attack against the opposite end of the line. The next morning, however, at the hour when the attack was supposed to have started, Lee rode to Longstreet's headquarters to find his subordinate still trying to figure out how to work his way around the Union left. Pickett was not yet even in position (neither Lee nor Longstreet had informed Pickett of the morning plan to attack), and Lee was forced to scrap the idea. Lee and Longstreet then rode up Seminary Ridge and examined the Union line on the parallel ridge to the east. Lee pointed to the right center of the ridge and designated it as the target of the day's assault. It would be softened with a massive artillery barrage to open the way for the infantry. Longstreet objected—how many men were to be in the attacking

force? Lee gave the figure at 15,000, to which Longstreet replied as follows: "General, I have been a soldier all my life. I have been with soldiers engaged in fights by couples, by squads, companies, regiments, divisions, and armies, and should know, as well as any one, what soldiers can do. It is my opinion that no fifteen thousand men ever arranged for battle can take that position."

While Lee would not change his general plan, he did relent and agree to leave Hood and McLaws in place on the army's right flank. Longstreet would instead attack the Union center with Pickett's Division, Maj. Gen. Henry Heth's Division (now under Brig. Gen. Johnston Pettigrew), which had been bled severely during July 1, and half of Maj. Gen. W. Dorsey Pender's Division (now under Maj. Gen. Isaac Trimble). Half of Anderson's Division would be aligned to support the expected breakthrough. Longstreet balked again at the idea of such a frontal attack, though he finally resigned himself to Lee's plan and personally directed Pickett's men into their positions behind Seminary Ridge. He supervised the placement of Hill's attacking divisions less carefully. Then Longstreet wrote to Alexander: "Colonel, let the batteries open."

During this bombardment, which drew a furious response from the Union guns on the opposite ridge, Longstreet showed himself at his most fearless. With the shells screaming and exploding all around him, he was observed by Brig. Gen. James Kemper of Pickett's Division:

Longstreet rode slowly and alone immediately in front of our entire line. He sat his large charger with a magnificent grace and composure I never before beheld. His bearing was to me the grandest moral spectacle of the war. I expected to see him fall every instant. Still he moved on, slowly and majestically, with an inspiring confidence, composure, self-possession and repressed power in every movement and look, that fascinated me.

Nearly two hours later, when the bombardment slackened, Longstreet still could not bring himself to give the order to

attack. Pickett had to ask his chief, "General, shall I advance?" and Longstreet merely nodded in reply. The assault was torn apart, and only a small fraction of the attacking infantry managed to reach the Union lines, where most either fell or surrendered. Longstreet watched helplessly from Seminary Ridge as the columns receded back toward his position in defeat. He reacted quickly after the disaster by getting artillery ready to repulse an expected Union counterattack, pulling McLaws' and Hood's Divisions back to a position west of the Emmitsburg Road, and helping to rally Pickett's men. The counterattack was not forthcoming; the battle of Gettysburg was over.

There was never any question that Longstreet would stay in his place at the head of the First Corps after Gettysburg. However, his conduct during the battle remained a subject of heated controversy—especially after Lee died. According to Moxley Sorrel, "There was apparent apathy in his movements. They lacked the fire and point of his usual bearing on the battlefield." According to Lafayette McLaws, "during the engagement he was very excited giving contradictory orders to everyone, and was exceedingly overbearing," although he wrote his assessment after his own feud over another issue broke out between the two men. It is worthy of note that Lee never blamed Longstreet for losing the battle at Gettysburg—as others would do following Lee's demise in 1870—and in fact assumed the responsibility himself.

After stellar offensive performance in North Georgia that fall at the Battle of Chickamauga, Longstreet performed less ably around Knoxville, Tennessee, and returned to the Army of Northern Virginia in the early spring of 1864. He was arrived just in time to save Lee's collapsing right flank in the Wilderness in May, and was critically wounded in a manner eerily reminiscent of Stonewall Jackson's mortal wounding at the height of a counterattack that was rolling up the Federal left flank. Although he returned to duty in October a weakened and crippled soldier, Lee's "Old

War Horse" was with his chief at the surrender at Appomattox Court House in April 1865.

Longstreet depended after the war on political appoints for a living and became a Republican—which resulted in his being ostracized by much of the South. He is perhaps best known during those years for his running feud with General Jubal Early over his role at Gettysburg. Longstreet died in 1904.

For further reading:

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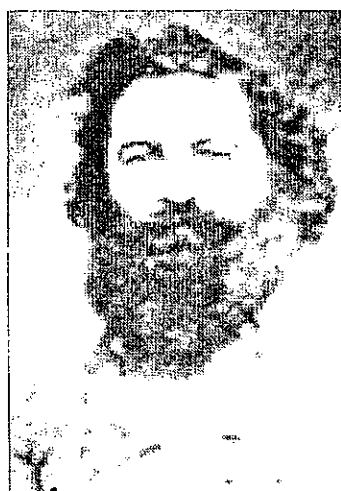
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"Square" and "solid" were adjectives that applied equally to Lafayette McLaws' character and appearance. His complexion was swarthy and his hair curly and very black; his beard was enormous and bushy and half-covered his broad face; and his eyes—"coal black" according to observant Rebel artilleryman Robert Stiles—peered out in a rather owlish way. He was short, compact, and burly, with big square shoulders, deep chest, and large, muscular arms. For his type, wrote Stiles, "he is a handsome man."

McLaws personified stolidity and reminded Stiles of the Roman centurion who stood at his post in Herculaneum "until the lava ran over him." He was a capable soldier without flair, whose steady performance never produced a high moment. His reliability and dogged tenacity rubbed off on his men, however, and made them as hard to dislodge as any in the army. He exuded unflinching fortitude, with the downside being that he lacked military imagination; McLaws was at his best when told exactly what to do and closely supervised by superiors. Although he developed a mastery of profanity, and could appear blunt and coarse, McLaws' martial demeanor hid a sensitive soul. He was a literate man who frequently poured out his experiences in candid, often sentimental letters to his wife. During the Fredericksburg Campaign,



McLAWS' DIVISION:

(7,153 MEN / 16 GUNS)

MAJOR GENERAL
LAFAYETTE McLAWS